

## Making the Transition: Reflection, Ownership and Agency in Academic Writing

*Abstract: English academic discourse is commonly characterised as objective and depersonalised. Yet at the centre of each student essay is an embodied subject who brings their own histories, affective responses and agency to their writing. This dimension may easily be overlooked in process-based approaches to teaching essay writing. We considered whether foregrounding the subjective aspects of writing implicit in a standard essay might encourage students to engage more meaningfully with the task and develop a stronger authorial voice. Hence, a reflective journal was designed to enhance essay writing for students studying on an international pre-master's programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. The reflective journal is intended as a "transitional space" (Winnicott 2005) between the student writer and the essay task, allowing the subjective dimension in the writing process to be made visible, even if this would ultimately be effaced in the final essay. This paper will report on the context, rationale and experience of using this reflective journal, illustrated with a case study showing one student's progress from the personal to the critical.*

### Introduction

The context for this paper is Goldsmiths, University of London, an institution with a predominantly arts, humanities and social sciences faculty base. Its student cohort, as is commonly the case today in higher education in the UK, is very international; according to the Goldsmiths website, there are students from 114 different countries currently studying there. Many programmes, particularly at Master's level, even have a majority of students who do not have English as a first language. Hence, English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) has a vital role to play in preparing international students for their future studies at Goldsmiths or other UK HE institutions.

Among a range of ESAP preparatory programmes delivered by Goldsmiths' English Language Centre is a Pre-master's Graduate Diploma. For this programme, as in all our teaching, there is a strong emphasis on researched discursive essay writing, since this is the main form of assessment on most Goldsmiths' degree programmes. The pedagogical approach used for the teaching of essay writing on the Graduate Diploma is a *process-based* one, whereby students are guided over several weeks through the various stages of researching, planning, drafting and editing an essay, scaffolded with advice from a personal tutor. Nevertheless, despite this structured guidance, our students often lack confidence in their essay writing, which is where student journals may be of benefit. Thomas and Armstrong (59) argue that giving students the opportunity to reflect on their essay writing, such as through writing a journal, has the potential to be transformational, allowing them to move from novice to confident writer. Hence, this paper focuses on a reflective journal we have developed with the aim of enhancing our students' engagement in the essay writing process. Our theoretical framework is inspired by Academic Literacies' focus on writing as social practice and emphasis on student writer identities (e.g. Lea and Street 1998, Ivanič 1998, Lillis 2001, Lillis and Scott 2007). Specifically, it is inspired by Academic Literacies scholar Phyllis Creme's collaboration with creative writing teacher Celia Hunt and their engagement with theories of the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott concerning transitional phenomena and playing, which they deploy as a means of rethinking the writer-text relationship in academic writing in order to foster "a 'creative criticality', a reflexive objectivity that

evolves from engagement and connectedness rather than alienation and fear” (Creme 276). The paper will outline the rationale and design of the reflective journal, and then consider one case study.

### **The reflective journal as an intermediate area**

An area of confusion and anxiety we frequently observe among both home and international students concerns the notion of academic *argument* as opposed to *personal opinion*, and the related issue of what is widely referred to as “critical thinking”. When in an academic writing class it is explained that an essay requires substantial reading and engagement with academic sources which must be cited according to conventions, a student might ask, “Why can’t I just write what I think?” But equally they may be baffled when instructed to “find their own way” of answering an essay title or to “position themselves”. In other words, they struggle in articulating an authorial presence in their writing, what Ivanič calls a “self as author” which “concerns the writer’s ‘voice’ in the sense of the writer’s position, opinions and beliefs” (26).

Yet Ivanič’s emphasis on student writer identity contrasts markedly with advice that may be found in guidelines regarding the “objective” quality of academic discourse and the need to avoid the “personal”. Such advice tends to focus on raising awareness of stylistic features such as the use of personal pronouns or the passive voice without any deeper unpacking of the discourse that would shed light on the constructedness of this objectivity and acknowledge the presence of an embodied author. This oversight, we would contend, is liable to contribute to the mystification around notions of argument. One UK university website, for example, advises: “Academic writing should very often be objective, with a lack of personal commitment, and being subjective may weaken your argument and lay you open to disagreement or criticism.” There is something self-contradictory in telling students to develop their own argument while instructing them to avoid personal commitment. It is hardly surprising that they are often confused.

Academic writing may be characterised as abstract and depersonalised; Coffin and Donohue (2014) use the felicitous term *decontextualised*. Yet whatever the linguistic realisations of this decontextualised quality, academic writing is inevitably situated in a context at the heart of which is an embodied subject with their own perspectives on the world, whose affective experience in the act of writing may be easily overlooked. As Creme comments:

We are so concerned with getting our students to develop a critical distance that we forget how, in order to get there, they also have to engage and be committed, to allow a relationship to grow between themselves as learner and her object of study. (276)

Our aim in producing a reflective journal was precisely to foster the growth of this relationship, helping students develop a greater sense of agency in approaching an essay assignment and developing a stronger sense of self as author.

While pondering this issue, we were reminded of a student who described her frustration when, during a tutorial to discuss an essay assignment, she was told by her tutor: “I don’t know where you’re going to take it.” This statement succinctly captures the relationship between the embodied subject *you*, the student writer, and *it*, the writing task, foregrounding the potentially fertile zone between them. Drawing on Winnicott’s terminology, this zone may be described as an *intermediate area* between subject and object: “an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute (...) between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived” (Winnicott 3-4). This constitutes a *transitional space* where new associations and perspectives may occur. Perhaps this

zone between is the locus of what Ivanič calls “the creative at the heart of the academic” (quoted in Tomic 62). Indeed, creativity is closely tied up with Winnicott’s concept of *playing*. Playing for Winnicott is fundamentally *doing*; it is an engaged activity taking place in the *potential space* between subject and the external world, where one is free to be creative. It is also a means of taking control of objects in the external world. This kind of creativity is a universal property connected with how an individual approaches the external world: “It belongs to being alive.” (91). Applying Winnicott’s ideas to learning in the academy, Creme and Hunt comment:

(...) creativity comes from a playful approach that allows the person to shift from the rational to other ways of thinking and relating, to play with ideas and “voices”, and generally to engage fully in an activity without the anxiety that so often accompanies (...) academic study. (156)

Creme further elaborates:

(...) “the creativity of life” is a transitional process where the individual feels empowered to make and re-make their life. The learner participates in their own learning in a holistic way. (273)

### **Design and use of the reflective journal**

The reflective journal developed for use with our Graduate Diploma Pathways students was envisaged as an intermediate area mediating their subjective, lived experience and the decontextualised discourse of the essay. In doing so, our aims were not particularly subversive or experimental; we were not seeking to unsettle the generic norms of the conventional essay. Rather, we wanted to challenge the apparent disjunction between the subject and object, and approach essay writing as a creative act, understanding creativity not in terms of artistic genius or radical originality, but as something more akin to Winnicott’s inclusive concept of creative living, which might enable students to make new connections and see things in a new way. Hence, the ambition was to foster a greater sense of confidence that they could exercise agency in taking the essay where they wanted to take it within the constraints of the task, and engage in the knowledge-making process of essay writing in a meaningful way.

The task in question is related to a two-term lecture strand that forms part of the Graduate Diploma programme entitled Critical Moments in Western Thought, which introduces key philosophies of Western modernity and postmodernity. It is a researched essay of 1500-2000 words set in the Spring term, i.e. the second term of the Graduate Diploma, and is completed over about six weeks, closely scaffolded by tutorial support. There is a choice of nine titles related to the lecture content. It is assessed on the final completed essay rather than a portfolio, and contributes to the coursework requirement of the Graduate Diploma programme. The reflective journal, first piloted in 2015, is completed at key points in the essay writing process: first, in the initial stages when students have received the essay titles and are beginning to explore their title of choice and establish a research base; secondly when they submit a plan of their essay and thirdly when they submit a first draft. Besides some tick-box questions asking students to evaluate their work in progress, it includes questions asking them to consider the following: their affective responses to the essay, both the topic and the task itself; connections they can make between the topic and their other knowledge and experience; choices available to them within the constraints of the title. They also write a brief reflection after their tutorials at each key stage. Such is the integral role of the student-tutor dialogue to the use of the reflective journal that it can be said that it is the combination of the two that constitutes an intermediate area with transformative potential. It

is also important to note that the reflective journal did not form part of the assessment. It functioned as an occluded writing practice (Thomas and Armstrong 2016) which, although not wholly private since it was shared with a personal tutor, was not subject to evaluation. To do so would risk inhibiting the student's freedom to "play". As with Winnicott's famous transitional object, the journal was not an end in itself.

A number of students in our cohort took what, following Foucault and Deleuze, might be referred to as a "tool-box" approach to the theories under study, using them as a means of exploring a specific context of the student's choice.

A theory is exactly like a box of tools. (...) It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. (208)

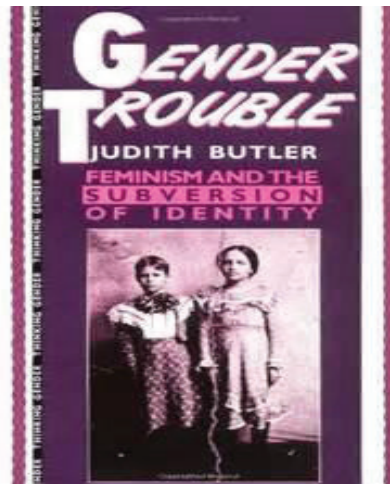
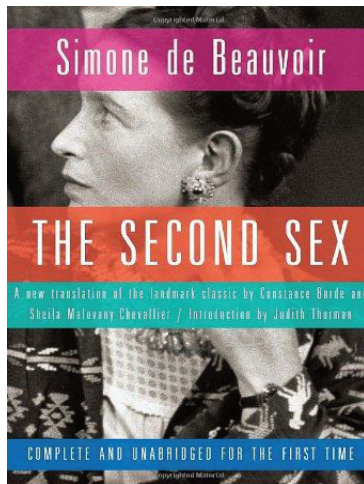
This was the approach taken by the student who features in our case study below.

### Case study

Our case study refers to a female Graduate Diploma student. So far on the programme she had achieved satisfactory grades without producing any truly outstanding work. From the list of titles, she opted to write the essay on gender theory as follows:

*Compare and contrast de Beauvoir's and Butler's views on gender.*

This title calls upon the student to engage critically with different waves of feminist thought. The answer would need to explain and contrast the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, author of the *Second Sex*, published in 1949, with Judith Butler's re-evaluation of gender identity in *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990. Both authors have been highly influential and these works arguably inaugurated so-called second and third wave feminism respectively. However, these thinkers are often perceived as having complex ideas and use of language, so that some students may find engaging with and critiquing them daunting. Butler, in particular, has a reputation for being difficult to read.



Part of the rationale for asking students more personalised questions in the reflective journal was to help them to overcome any trepidation and find a “way in” to the theory. The journal begins by asking *Which essay title have you chosen?* The next question then encourages them to make connections between the topic and their personal interests and feelings:

*Why did you choose this title? Explain what you find interesting about it.*

In response, the student in our case study wrote the following:

I am playing in a band in London. Also, I used to play in rock bands in Japan. I have been thinking about that the female population in music industry is much less than male (in the UK, male = 67.8 per cent / female = 32.3 per cent) This industry is still dominated by men. Also, in my experience, I sometimes felt uncomfortable when I was on stage and after I finished my performance, by some audience’s behaviour.

The student identifies herself as a rock musician. She had joined a band with three men, playing in small venues across London. She was therefore already in a minority of one, and was concerned at the wider gender imbalance across the music industry. We were interested to note her personal interest and identification with the topic at this early stage.

*I am playing in a band in London(...) I have been thinking that that female population in music industry is much less than male(...)*

*Also, in my experience, I sometimes felt uncomfortable when I was onstage and after I finished my performance, by some audiences behavior.*

This subjective response continued in her responses to the next questions:

*What do you already know about this topic? Can you connect it to anything else you have read or thought about?*

*Because I am a woman who is playing in a rock band. Thus, I am very interested in gender roles in music. This is why I chose this essay title.*

In these comments, the first person *I* is used repeatedly, and the focus is on the student’s personal response. The next question in the reflective journal focused specifically on the affective dimension of the title:

*At this point, what are your feelings about the topic? Write at least three adjectives to describe your impressions, then explain your feelings in more detail.*

The student wrote the following:

*Curious: I am a woman. So, I want to know how women in the past thought gender roles.*

Scary: I do not have any knowledge about Beauvoir and Butler. So, I am worried that I can write their comparison properly.

Difficult: As I mentioned above, I do not know well about them. However, when I researched about Beauvoir's thinking, my first impression of it was 'difficult'. So, I think it will be harder and harder, when I will start to write this essay.

Here, the second and third adjectives, *scary* and *difficult*, reflect the challenging nature of the essay task, and similar words were used by several other students from the same group. However, it seems significant that *curious* was the first response, indicating that the student was motivated to find out something for herself, and to understand more clearly notions of gender roles and identities. Moreover, the student has identified a personal stake in this issue ("I am a woman"), and she states "I want to know", which might act as a counterpoint to the fear highlighted by the other adjectives.

The next questions in the reflective journal asked about students' endeavours to establish a research base for their essay, and require them to comment on their choices:

*Which sources have you found so far? Why did you choose them? What do you think of them?*

To which the student in our case study wrote:

*The lost women of rock Music* –Reddington, H.

*The Sex Revolts* –Reynolds, S.

*Gender in the music Industry* –Leonard, M.

All of them strongly relate to gender, sex and feminism in rock music. I just skimmed them, but they are really interesting and writing about what I want to know!

Once again, there is a clear expression of personal interest and motivation ("they are really interesting"; "I want to know") and there is also a sense that the essay is not about some dry or abstract theory. Rather, it relates to the student's own life experience and is therefore meaningful. This personal motivation to *find out* can encourage the student to take ownership and control of their learning in the creative and holistic manner advocated by Creme.

On the other hand, regarding the sources the student has found, the key thinkers mentioned in the essay title, Beauvoir and Butler, are conspicuous by their absence. This points to the risk that a student may become so preoccupied with their own personal interests that they veer off in their own direction and fail to address the heart of the question. In this instance, this potential pitfall was noticed by the student's personal tutor when reading the reflective journal, and the student's attention was drawn to it in the next tutorial meeting. The reflective journal also asks students to comment on what is discussed in tutorials, and the comment made by our case study student reveals that she has taken good note of the tutor's advice:

*What did your tutor tell you? Was there anything surprising or unexpected? Did it change the way feel about the essay?*

My main part of essay is comparison & contrast of Beauvoir and Butler's view. Don't forget this!

Below are two extracts from the introduction to the finished essay: it can be seen that the student has now found academic sources to explain, theorise and account for what she has already felt in her personal life.

'A woman playing a rock instrument is breaking the gender code' (Baytan, 1997:43). This quote indicates that women who play rock music is not along with the notion of gender, rock music should be played by men.

(...) Furthermore, women face objectification and exploitation because of their gender, perhaps because of the stereotypical views of them as 'sexual commodities' (McClary, 191:151). This essay will analyse women's gender roles in rock music from Butler's and Beauvoir's views, especially their views of the notion of gender in our culture.

When the student's initial journal reflections are juxtaposed with what she eventually wrote in the essay, it can be seen that, while the focus of the content remains similar, there has been a significant shift from the explicitly subjective, contextualised comments towards a recognisably decontextualised academic style.

Journal entry	Final essay
<p>I am playing in a band in London(...) I have been thinking that that female population in music industry is much less than male.</p> <p>Also, in my experience, I sometimes felt uncomfortable when I was onstage and after I finished my performance, by some audiences behavior.</p>	<p>'A woman playing a rock instrument is breaking the gender code' (Baytan, 1997:43). This quote indicates that women who play rock music is not along with the notion of gender, rock music should be played by men.</p> <p>Furthermore, women face objectification and exploitation because of their gender, perhaps because of the stereotypical views of them as 'sexual commodities' (McClary, 191:151).</p>
<p>Focus on actions and mental processes Focus on affect "I felt uncomfortable" Subjective lived experience: I mentioned four times Monoglossic (student's voice alone)</p>	<p>Impersonal Subject shift from first to third person Theorisation of social phenomena Heteroglossic (brings in the voices of others)</p>

In the final essay, the personal feelings and interest voiced in the journal have become invisible. Arguably however, asking the student to write the reflective journal and encouraging her to focus on these feelings at the outset provided her with the impetus to argue a strong case in the finished work. The personal response to the essay title could be thought of as a *subconscious* of the text, or its back story. Thus, there is a subjective history to the essay which has been displaced, but whose influence can still be discerned in the argument.



A closer examination of the language choices in the two sets of extracts shows how this displacement is produced. The journal entry uses the first person pronoun / four times. It focuses on the student's own context—her real-life experiences and the feelings and responses these provoke. These are not considered in any wider theoretical context, so that the only voice we hear is the student's own, making the journal entry monoglossic. In contrast, the finished essay uses the third person to evoke in more objective terms "A woman playing a rock instrument (...)" There is a corresponding move to a discussion of wider social phenomena regarding gender issues, which is now informed by the words of others, creating a multi-voiced (heteroglossic) text which follows academic conventions for citing source materials. The final essay also uses other linguistic forms common in English academic discourse such as nominalisation, longer sentences with subordinate clauses, and cohesive devices. These features continue through the essay, and can be seen in the following extracts from the conclusion:

From Beauvoir and Butler's perspective of gender, gender is not what we are born with and have inherent in our bodies(...) However, by using term for female musicians in rock music 'women in rock', they should not categorise themselves as a specific gender.

(...)Nevertheless, if female musicians attempt to cope with this difficulty, they must continue to make music which they want to make and play any instruments which they choose, and dress how they see as appropriate, without any value judgements from others. By doing so, people's perspective for female musicians can be changed, and they might be purely judged as not 'female musicians', but 'musicians'.

Here, the student offers a critical analysis of an aspect of the social world (i.e. gendered identities) using an analytical framework based on the ideas of Beauvoir and Butler, the key theorists mentioned in the essay title. She takes due account of them, but her own voice is never lost. The conclusion is, therefore, her own, confidently argued point of view.

## **Conclusion**

Regarding the use of the reflective journal in the case study, firstly it can be said that the student produced a significantly better piece of work than she had managed previously without using a journal. The final essay was awarded a distinction, a higher grade than she had gained before, and there was a noticeable improvement in her engagement with theory and ability to take a critical stance towards the essay topic.

This marked improvement in this student's writing appears to bear out Thomas and Armstrong's notion of the transformative potential of writing journals, and the intermediate area provided by the reflective journal did indeed help our case study student move towards a more expert-like writer identity. The journal's initial focus on the lived experience and the affective was motivating in this case, in so far as it created a desire to learn and understand more deeply. This motivation arguably encouraged the student to engage with complex theory—as it was the theory that would help her "to know". The reflective journal together with the tutorials, did indeed provide an intermediate area where the student could safely play with feelings and ideas. As we saw, she did not get everything right the first time round, for example when she became so focused on her personal interests that she risked ignoring the key theorists; however the finished essay manages to remain informed by the student's own feelings, while still discussing them with critical distance. This actually enhanced



criticality in the essay, the student being able to “own” her argument and maintain a clear authorial voice.

As explained, the reflective journal, although read by a personal tutor, was a personal document for students’ own use and benefit, and was not evaluated. This occluded, unjudged nature of the journal may have given the subject of our case study the space and confidence to think aloud, reflect and experiment with the essay topic, until she had worked out her own stance and how she wanted to approach the essay. The structured questions in the journal, which were addressed at important stages in the essay writing process, acted as scaffolding to aid the student in her journal reflections and in the wider task of writing the essay.

This paper has focused on a single case study of a student who successfully engaged with the reflective journal. Regarding the entire student cohort that year, the picture was more mixed; some students wrote a lot, some used the journal erratically, while others made little use of it. Subsequently, the journal has been more embedded into the academic writing class in order to bring greater clarity to its purpose and to make it more integral to the writing process. This means, for example, that some of the reflective writing is done in class time, and more students are making effective use of the journal. One tutor mentioned that the journals seemed to be helping students to be more successful in applying the skills they had been practising in writing classes to their essays. A final and important benefit that tutors emphasised is the improved communications with their students. The comments written in the reflective journal have provided a focus for tutorials and resulted in more productive discussions. We are monitoring the impact of the reflective journal and looking at embedding it further into our teaching of academic writing in the future.

Finally, in terms of our wider conclusions, we have been encouraged by our use of the reflective journal and believe that the foregrounding of the subjective from the outset may help promote greater engagement with the essay topic. It may also provide students with a pathway to a deeper, more critical engagement with theoretical concepts, and a more confident authorial voice in their academic writing.

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